

Stephenson, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1190438  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2016.1190438>



Received: 14 November 2015  
 Accepted: 12 May 2016  
 Published: 22 June 2016

\*Corresponding author: Erik Stephenson,  
 The College of the Humanities, Carleton  
 University, 1125 Colonel By Drive,  
 Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6  
 E-mail: [erik.stephenson@carleton.ca](mailto:erik.stephenson@carleton.ca)

Reviewing editor:  
 Peter Stanley Fosl, Transylvania  
 University, USA

Additional information is available at  
 the end of the article

## PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Common natures of finite modes in Spinoza's *Ethics*

Erik Stephenson<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper revisits the question of the ontological status of universals in Spinoza's *Ethics*. Specifically, it re-examines its position on common natures of finite modes. I first show that while it clearly teaches that only individuals ultimately exist and that universals are mere mental constructs, it nevertheless also posits the mind-independent existence of common natures of finite modes. I then reconcile these seemingly contradictory elements, arguing that common natures of finite modes are in themselves mere "formal essences", devoid of all being and neither individual nor universal (universality being something they acquire only in the mind), and that they take on existence in individuated form as real metaphysical constituents of the "actual essences" of singular things.

**Subjects:** History of Philosophy; Humanities; Philosophy

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Benedictus de; universals; ontology; actual essence; formal essence; human essence; common natures; individuation; finite modes

### 1. Introduction

Spinoza's position in the *Ethics* on the ontological status of universals in general is usually taken to be nominalistic.<sup>1</sup> Proponents of the nominalist reading agree that it involves the belief (1) that only individuals exist outside the mind,<sup>2</sup> and thus, accordingly, (2) that universals exist only in the mind. As this paper will show, insofar as this is what it takes Spinoza's nominalism in the *Ethics* to consist in, this reading is incontrovertible. Nevertheless, I want to argue that Spinoza's adherence to these propositions does not preclude a belief in the mind-independent existence of natures common to

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik Stephenson holds a PhD in philosophy from McGill University and is an instructor at Carleton University's College of the Humanities. His two main research interests are the philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza and the writings of Dante Alighieri. His long-term research project on Spinoza seeks to shed new light on many vexed questions in the interpretation of his thought by re-examining it in light of its ancient and medieval sources. He is also at work on a project that re-evaluates the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and other twelfth-century Cistercians on Dante.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

So much of our thinking involves universals like "two", "chair" and "love". But what do these concepts refer to? Do universals exist outside the mind? Or are they mere mental constructs? Much is at stake in the answer to this question, especially since so many ethical theories are ultimately grounded in an alleged grasp of an allegedly real universal human nature. As this paper shows, Spinoza's ethical theory—as conveyed in his greatest work, the *Ethics*—is no exception. More broadly, this paper begins by demonstrating that Spinoza's *Ethics* posits the real existence of natures common to many individually existing things. And yet, as this paper shows next, the *Ethics* also clearly teaches that only individual things exist and that universals have no mind-independent existence. Is the *Ethics* incoherent? This paper argues that these seemingly divergent strands can be reconciled, thus salvaging the consistency of this most systematic of philosophical works.

many finite individuals as metaphysical constituents of their being.<sup>3</sup> Spinoza's position in the *Ethics* on the ontological status of 'universals'—or, more precisely, of common natures of finite modes—is thus, I will show, a form of realism attenuated by significant nominalist elements.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is commonly argued that Spinoza's stance on universals in the *Ethics* is *purely* nominalistic.<sup>5</sup> As an antidote to this reading, Part I of this paper will examine the evidence in the *Ethics* supporting the view that Spinoza believed in the real existence of common natures of finite modes. This evidence deserves a fresh look since its most important aspects have been overlooked: for example, the fact that these common natures do not in themselves involve existence and are neither particular nor universal. In Part II, I will address the passages in the *Ethics* that seem to militate against any realist reading and thus to speak in favour of a purely nominalist reading. In Part III, I will demonstrate how his brand of realism can incorporate the nominalist elements mentioned above without falling into inconsistency by delineating with more precision the nature of his realism with respect to common natures of finite modes. This will involve demonstrating how common natures of finite modes only acquire actual existence in and through actually existing finite individuals as one of their real metaphysical constituents, or, rather, insofar as finite individuals *are* these common natures in individuated form.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Part I: realist elements

A good place to start is IP8S2—specifically, its demonstration that there is only one substance of the same nature.<sup>7</sup> It begins by postulating that “the true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined”. In themselves and in their most fundamental form, the natures of the infinitely many things God produces (IP16)—that is, of all the modes of God's attributes—do not inherently involve existence, although they are capable of receiving it from, and thus being actualized by, an external source. Hence, since the definition of each thing captures its nature only, the definitions of the infinitely many things that God engenders do not involve existence either.

The proof we are following in IP8S2 next takes as given that “no definition”—and hence no nature—“involves or expresses any certain number of individuals”. Spinoza gives an example: “the definition of the triangle” and hence “the simple nature of the triangle” do not involve “any certain number of triangles”. Clearly, by “individual” here Spinoza means something incapable of multiple instantiations or being common to many. He also clearly thinks that even if it does not of itself involve a certain number of triangles, “triangularity” can be common to many individual triangles. Hence, not only does it not involve only one instantiation of itself, it is not itself individual. For if it were, there could not be many triangles. Triangularity is the example Spinoza uses for all natures, but it should only be concluded that the nature of *modes* is not inherently individual because since God's nature is “unique” (IP14C1), and he exists necessarily (IP11), he must be individual by his very essence. But neither, I want to argue, is the nature of any mode inherently universal.

Spinoza nowhere formally defines universality. But he comes close. In IIP49S, he says that “the universal” is that which “is said equally of one, a great many, or infinitely many individuals”. And his other efforts to explain what he *means* by calling something universal agree with this account.<sup>8</sup> If universality amounts to predicability of many, and the natures of created things do not involve any number of instantiations of themselves—that is, things of which they can be predicated—then they cannot be intrinsically universal. Moreover, only concepts and the words denoting them are predicable of many. The natures of created things—which Spinoza gives no indication in IP8S2 of thinking are mere mental beings—are *not* in themselves predicable in this way. Hence, they are not intrinsically universal. The natures of modes do not inherently involve existence, and are in themselves neither individual nor universal.<sup>9</sup>

Spinoza's next step in IP8S2 is to add two further postulates: (1) for each existing thing there must be a cause that accounts for its existence and (2) this cause must either be part of its very nature or external to it. So if many individuals of the same nature exist, there must be a cause “why those

individuals” exist. This cause cannot be the nature those individuals share, for such common natures do not involve any definite number of individuals possessing them. The cause of the existence of individuals of the same nature must be external to the nature they hold in common. To illustrate, Spinoza says that if 20 men are supposed to exist, their existence as individuals cannot be explained through “human nature in general”. This is because the latter is neither particular nor universal, and does not encompass any specific number of human beings. The cause of the existence of particular human beings, *qua* particular, must be sought outside the general nature they share in common.

By following the proof this far, we have established three things: (1) the natures of modes do not involve existence; (2) they also involve neither particularity nor universality; and (3) actually existing *finite* individuals can possess one and the same nature in common.<sup>10</sup> A distinction is therefore to be made between (A) the commonality of natures finite individuals can share, which certainly appears to be something real, and (B) the universality of such natures, which is something they can only acquire when a mind recognizes that the concept it has formed of them is predicable of many.

That finite individuals can possess the same nature is confirmed throughout the *Ethics*. In IP17S, Spinoza demonstrates that if God were endowed with an intellect and will, these would differ *toto coelo* from our intellect and will. What matters is the principle upon which the demonstration of this is based and the gloss Spinoza provides of it. The principle is that “what is caused differs from its cause precisely in what it has from the cause”. As a gloss, Spinoza adds:

E.g. a man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth. Hence, they can agree entirely (*prorsus convenire*) according to their essence. But in existing they must differ. And for that reason, if the existence of one perishes, the other’s existence will not thereby perish. But if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other’s essence would also be destroyed.

This is further proof that many finite individuals—“e.g.” many individual “men”—can “agree entirely”, possessing one and the same essence in common.<sup>11</sup> It might be argued that the sameness in essence between finite individuals evoked here is just a resemblance between individuals that have nothing in common in themselves. It might thus be alleged that the commonality apparently involved here is merely a mental construct formed on the basis of mere resemblances—not something mind independent.<sup>12</sup> But such a reading would fall afoul of the unequivocal assertion in this passage that the destruction of the essence that constitutes the being of one human being, *qua* human, *ipso facto* amounts to the destruction of the essence that constitutes the being of all other human beings *qua* human. If the essence that constitutes the being of X were merely to resemble the essence of Y without actually being the same as it—that is, ontologically identical—then the destruction of the essence of X would not necessarily and *ipso facto* imply the destruction of the essence of Y.

Spinoza’s realism regarding common natures of finite modes can be gathered from the proof of IVP30. What is more, this proof also: (1) drives home the fact that the nature common to two or more finite modes is *ontologically identical* in them and (2) makes plain that we are to take this ontological identity in the most radical sense possible. IVP30 argues that: “no thing can be evil through what it has in common with our nature (...)”. A thing is evil if it “diminishes or restrains our power of acting”—that is, if it hinders our drive to be and give rise to all those effects that follow from our nature. Spinoza continues: “if a thing were evil for us through what it has in common with us, then the thing could diminish or restrain what it has in common with us”. But since “no thing can be destroyed except through an external cause” (IIIP4), this is absurd. Hence, a thing cannot be harmful to us through what it has in common with us. The reference to IIIP4, which argues that nothing is self-destructive because no essence is self-contradictory, shows that the reason Spinoza thinks nothing can harm us through what it has in common with our nature is that if this were not the case, both the thing itself and we ourselves would be self-destructive (with respect to that which we have in common). As D. Steinberg has pointed out,<sup>13</sup> this argument does not work if essential trait X in A is taken to be merely similar to essential trait X in B, such that in reality these traits are not

absolutely the same and we are not really dealing with one essential trait shared by two things at all (the commonality merely being a mental construct based on similarity exhibited by two distinct and radically individual traits). For if X in A were merely similar to X in B, but not actually the same, it would not follow from A harming B in virtue of being X that both A and B would be self-destructive *qua* X. Nor does the reasoning hold if X in A and X in B are distinct instances of some one trait, X-ness. For if this were the case, it still would not follow from A harming B in virtue of their both being X that A and B would be self-destructive because X in A would not be absolutely the same as X in B (they would be numerically distinct instances of X-ness).

IVP30 has yielded further confirmation of the real existence of common natures of finite modes—or, at the very least, of common traits to their natures. It has also shown that such common natures or essential traits are shared by the finite individuals they are common to without being separately instantiated in them.<sup>14</sup> IVP36, which draws upon much of the material just examined, shows that individual human beings share a common nature. It thus offers further testimony to Spinoza's realism regarding common natures of finite modes. But it cannot be understood without a grasp of the propositions from parts III and IV of the *Ethics* upon which it also builds.

To Spinoza, each thing strives, in virtue of its essence, to be the thing it is as determined by that essence (IIP6 and P7). In other words, the essence of each thing is, inherently, a drive to maximally express itself. A thing is virtuous, and thus free (ID7; IVP66S) and happy (IVP18S), to the extent that it has the power to act (IID2) or give rise to effects that can be understood to follow from its nature alone (IVD8). Whatever aids our striving to be, act and persevere in being—that is, whatever increases our virtue, power, freedom and thus happiness—is good (IVD1). Whatever does the opposite is evil (IVD2). Now, by IIP3, human beings only act insofar as they are rational or have adequate ideas.<sup>15</sup> To understand adequately is the only thing we can strive for insofar as we are rational and in the certainty that it is good. God is the highest and, indeed, only object of knowledge since he is the absolutely infinite being of which all things are the merely immanent self-production (IP15 and P18). All things must therefore be thought through him. Thus, knowledge of anything not only involves, but amounts to, knowledge of God. Hence, since adequate knowledge is the highest human good, and all adequate knowledge is ultimately knowledge of God, the latter is the highest human good.

We can now understand the argument of IVP36 and its scholium. IVP36 demonstrates that the highest human good—knowledge of God—is common to all. The demonstration works on the basis of the facts that the highest human good is the knowledge of God, and the human mind as such “has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence” (IIP47). This last proposition can be made intelligible as follows. The most common trait shared by extended things is the attribute of extension itself. Likewise, all particular thoughts or minds involve the attribute of thought. And because all particular bodies, for example, involve the attribute of extension itself, it cannot but be conceived adequately (IIP38) by “all men” (IIP38C).<sup>16</sup> Attributes are different ways in which God's absolutely infinite essence can be expressed. Hence, they constitute God's essence.<sup>17</sup> And thus adequate knowledge of the attributes of extension and thought being “common to all men” means that an adequate knowledge of God is “a good that is common to all men, and can be possessed equally by all men insofar as they are of the same nature”. The commonality of the highest good for humans is thus implied to follow from the commonality of their nature. The latter, furthermore, is implied to be reason in the broad sense of a power for developing adequate ideas.<sup>18</sup> For it is only on the basis of such a power that we can develop adequate ideas.

This is all made even clearer in the scholium to P36. It explains that the highest human good is necessarily common because:

(...) it is deduced from the very essence of man, insofar as [that essence] is defined by reason, and because man could neither be nor be conceived if he did not have the power to enjoy this greatest good. For it pertains to the essence of the human mind (by IIP47) to have an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.

The proof that the highest human good is common to all humans works by drawing attention to the fact that this good is deduced from the human essence, and then asserting, on this basis, that humans, as such, can neither be nor be conceived without the ability to enjoy this good to some extent. Clearly, it is taken for granted here that human nature or the capacity to form adequate ideas—which all involve an adequate knowledge God, our highest good—is something common to all individual human beings.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Part II: nominalist elements

I have established that: (1) common natures of finite modes are real; (2) they are not just mental constructs formed through a process of abstraction on the basis of mere resemblances between things that in themselves have nothing in common; (3) they cannot be instantiated by multiple individuals, although multiple individuals can agree in them; (4) they do not have being in themselves; and (5) they are in themselves neither particular nor universal. I must now examine the evidence in the *Ethics* in favour of the purely nominalist reading. This evidence will show Spinoza subscribed to two fundamental nominalist propositions: namely, (1) that only individuals exist and (2) that universals are mere beings of thought. But it is possible to reconcile this evidence with Spinoza's demonstrated belief in the real existence of common natures of finite modes. This reconciliation will require that I spell out with greater precision in Part III the ontological status of such common natures. Most notably, I will have to elucidate what it means for the common natures of finite things not to have any being in themselves. In so doing, I will show how such natures only come to exist in being individuated—that is, insofar as they are “constituted” or made fully determinate by the individuals whose being they themselves partially make up.<sup>20</sup>

The list of passages in the *Ethics* that seem to imply that individuals alone exist and that, consequently, universals are only mental beings is long. Most notably, it includes: IID2, IIPP11–13, IIP40S1, IIPP48–49 and IIIPP56–57.

The definition Spinoza puts forward of what “belongs” to (IID2) or “constitutes” (IIP10S) the essence of something is commonly taken to exclude the possibility of the real existence of common essences.<sup>21</sup> The first part of the definition can be paraphrased as follows:

If X belongs to or constitutes the essence of some thing, Y, then if X exists, Y must also exist. On the other hand, if X does not exist, then *ipso facto* neither does Y. This is to say that X belongs to or constitutes the essence of Y if and only if Y can neither be nor be conceived without X.

This first part alone seems to exclude the possibility of common essences. For it says the real existence of a given common essence would entail the existence of all its possible instantiations—a patent absurdity. The essences of singular things must themselves be singular. Spinoza adds a second part to his definition that makes the logical and causal relation between X and Y one of mutual implication, such that if X truly belongs to the essence of a thing, Y, then it is also true that X can neither be nor be conceived without the thing, Y, it constitutes the essence of. This too seems fatal to the belief in common natures. For it seems to imply that, were they to exist, the being and conceivability of common essences would depend upon the existence of each and every one of the things that share it. And this is absurd.

Propositions 11 through 13 of part II address the issue of that which belongs to or constitutes the “essence of man” insofar as he is a mode of the attribute of thought (“mind”). In proposition 11, Spinoza argues that the “first thing” that constitutes the “essence” or “actual being” of the mind is “nothing but the idea of a singular thing that actually exists”. In proposition 13, it turns out that this “singular thing that actually exists”, the idea of which constitutes the essence of the actually existing human mind, is the human body. The latter is singular in Spinoza's sense of being finite or a “certain and determinate” mode. But singularity in this technical sense involves singularity in the broader, scholastic sense of an incapacity for multiple instantiations. This is part of what it means for



finite modes, as such, to be “certain and determinate”: their essence or actual being, in being individual or incapable of being shared by many, is fully determinate. P13S tells us that what has been said in PP11–13 regarding humans is “completely general and [does] not pertain more to man than to other Individuals (...)”. Hence, we may conclude that what ultimately constitutes the essence or actual being of any finite thing *qua* mode of the attribute of thought is singular, not common. Indeed, given Spinoza’s doctrine of the parallelism of modes between each attribute (IIP7), the same must be said for finite modes within all attributes. And this appears to rule out the existence of common natures—or at least of natures that would be common to finite modes and constitutive of their actual being.

In IIPP48–49, Spinoza explains how the notions of absolute faculties of willing, understanding and so on are “either complete fictions or nothing but metaphysical beings, or universals, which are used to forming from particulars”, and which are “not distinguished from the singulars from which we form them”. In reality, there are only “singular volitions”, from the ideas of which we form the abstract notion of an indeterminate will-in-general, just as we form the abstract notion of a universal “stone-nature” from our ideas of “this or that stone”, or that of “humanity” from our ideas of “Peter or Paul”. The implication seems to be that only individual things truly exist, while our concepts of general classes to which these might belong are precisely that: nothing more than mental constructs.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Part III: synthesis of the realist and nominalist elements

The evidence presented in Part II strongly suggests that: (1) essences (outside the mind) are ultimately singular; (2) it is ultimately only individual things that actually exist; and thus (3) universals do not exist in reality, but only in the mind.<sup>23</sup> But then what is to be made of the abundant evidence in the *Ethics* in favour of the existence of common natures of finite modes? How are these two apparently conflicting strands to be reconciled? Some would say they cannot be.<sup>24</sup> Others would reconcile them by dismissing the passages that posit or presuppose the real existence of common natures of finite modes as either unintended “loose speaking” or—when they figure in Spinoza’s ethical doctrine—deliberate recourse to edifying fiction.<sup>25</sup> In what follows, I will explain why I do not believe the evidence discussed in Part II excludes the possibility of mind-independent common natures of finite modes, and delineate how I think the two apparently conflicting strands can be reconciled.<sup>26</sup>

I will begin by clarifying the ontological status of common natures of finite modes in themselves, precisely insofar as they do not, in themselves, involve existence of any sort.<sup>27</sup> To do so, I will examine what Spinoza tells us about finite modes that “do not exist”. This topic is broached in IP8S2, but only really explored in the corollary and scholium to IIP8. The latter seeks to show that “the ideas of singular things, or of [finite] modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God’s infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God’s attributes”.<sup>28</sup> This is the first mention of formal essences in the *Ethics*. How they differ from actual essences is vital to my theory. Here, we are told that the formal essences of nonexistent finite modes are contained in God’s attributes. In the corollary to this proposition, nonexistent singular things are said to exist “only insofar as they are comprehended in God’s attributes”. I conclude that nonexistent finite modes exist only insofar as their formal essences are enveloped in God’s attributes. Insofar as this is the case, their ideas have no real existence as determinate ideas distinguishable from the ideas of all other singular things. Indeed, they “do not exist” apart from the existence in God’s infinite intellect of the idea of the attribute of which these nonexistent modes are modes. In sum, nonexistent finite modes exist only as formal essences—that is, mere unexpressed possibilities of being—completely enfolded within their corresponding attributes and the ideas of those attributes.<sup>29</sup>

I take IIP8 with its corollary and scholium to establish that: (1) the formal essences of all singular things or finite modes are comprehended in God’s attributes and (2) these formal essences have no being of their own, but exist only as possibilities of being merely implicit (*implicata*) in their respective attributes and the ideas of these attributes in the infinite intellect.<sup>30</sup> I think it very plausible to

suggest that when Spinoza says the essences of finite modes do not involve existence in themselves and in their most fundamental form, he is referring to formal essences, which do not have being in themselves, and in themselves only exist enveloped in God's attributes and the ideas of these attributes in the infinite intellect. I have shown that common essences of finite modes have real, mind-independent existence, but that in themselves they do not have existence. We now begin to see what this means: they are formal essences.<sup>31</sup>

Devoid of any being in themselves, formal essences are also devoid of any inherent striving to act or persevere in being. IP24 informs us that "the essence of things produced by God does not involve existence". To Spinoza, "it follows" from this that God is the cause both of things coming to exist and of their "persevering in being". Modes neither exist nor persevere in being in virtue of what they are in themselves and in their most fundamental form—that is, according to their formal essences. Only God exists in virtue of his essence (IP11), which means that only God is, in virtue of his own infinite essence, an infinite power of self-expression (IP34). Modes ultimately receive their being from God, and are only thus immanent expressions of God's inherent and infinite being or self-productive power (IP18; IP25S)—actually existing finite modes being merely partial expressions of this infinite self-affirming power. Once their formal essence has received being from an external source (ultimately: God), modes actually exist and strive to remain in being as the kinds of things they are. Thus, Spinoza chooses his words very carefully when, in IIP7, he explains that it is the "*actual* essence (*actualis essentia*)" of each existing thing that is inherently an active striving to "persevere in being" as the thing it is.<sup>32</sup>

The formal essences of finite modes are actualized, and thus become "actual essences", when the "common order of nature"—the infinite chain of finite causes (IP28)—brings about the conditions required for the actual existence of finite modes with such formal essences. We have seen that all actually existing things are ultimately individual. As the essences of actually existing things, actual essences must therefore be individual; they constitute the being of individuals precisely as the individuals they are.<sup>33</sup> But we have also seen that formal essences can be common to finite modes, and that these common essences are "in" finite individuals as metaphysical constituents of their being. Their presence in actually existing individuals is what accounts for the fact that actually existing individuals can, despite their being individuals, nevertheless have certain essential traits in common. But formal essences do not, in themselves, have any being. My suggestion is that actual essences represent, or at the very least involve, the actualization of formal essences. To actually exist is to be individual. Hence, the actualization of formal essences that are common will involve their individuation. Actual essences of finite modes thus are, or involve, common formal essences of finite modes in individuated form. Common formal essences are "in" the actual essences of finite modes, but in fully determinate form. For example, "triangularity" is "in" a particular isosceles triangle—this is what makes the latter a triangle—but in completely determinate form, having taken on *these* dimensions, *these* angles and so forth.<sup>34</sup>

Admittedly, this is a somewhat speculative suggestion. But I think it is borne out by the text of the *Ethics*, and that it allows us to read it as presenting one consistent teaching on the ontological status of the "universals" (loosely speaking) that form the essence of finite modes. More precisely, and using the language of the *Ethics*, my suggestion is that the actual essence of a finite mode involves a common formal essence that has been "constituted"—that is, made "certain and determinate"—by being "given" or made to exist by the causal order of nature.

If the definition of what "belongs to" or "constitutes" the essence of something at IID2<sup>35</sup> seems to make essences individual by making the logical and causal relationship between essences and the individual things whose essences they are one of mutual implication, this is because what Spinoza is defining in giving a definition of that which "constitutes the essence of a thing" (IIP10S) is the actual essence of a thing, which constitutes—in the sense of being the actualization and thus individuation of—the common formal essence of that thing.<sup>36</sup> The actual essence of a finite mode is always individual, and represents or involves the constitution—that is, individuation or complete

determination—of a common formal essence. Thus, what IID2 tells us is that if something constitutes the formal essence of a thing—that is, is an actual essence—then its being given implies the existence of the thing of which it is the actual essence. And, *vice versa*, the existence of the thing entails the existence of its actual essence, for the two are really the same thing.<sup>37</sup>

This suggestion allows us to see, for example, how propositions 11 through 13 of part II are compatible with the real existence of common (formal) essences of finite modes. Proposition 11 demonstrates that the “first thing that constitutes the actual being” of our mind—which I take to be synonymous with our mind’s “actual essence”—is the idea of a “singular thing that actually exists”. Here, “constitutes” merely means “makes up” or what the actual being of our mind consists in. Proposition 13 specifies that the idea the actual being of our mind consists in is the idea of our actually existing body. Its scholium adds that what has been established for human beings in these propositions is true of all finite modes. As we saw earlier, we can thus infer that insofar as we and all other finite things exist, we and all other finite things are necessarily individual. But these propositions do not rule out the reality of common (formal) essences of finite modes. Thus, the demonstration to proposition 11 begins with the fact that the “essence of man (by P10C) is constituted by certain modes of God’s attributes”—for example, since “man thinks” (IIA2), by “modes of thinking”. This is ambiguous. It can be taken to mean that the actual essence or being of man consists in certain modifications of God’s attributes. But it can also be taken to mean that the common (formal) essence of man is “constituted” in the technical sense of being actualized—and thus individuated or made fully determinate—in and through the actual existence of certain modes of God’s attributes produced by the common order of nature. This last reading gains credence by the reference to P10C, in which it is first shown that “the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes”. This corollary directly follows from P10, the scholium to which makes clear that the “essence of man” is something that is common to many individual human beings. As such, it is, in itself, a formal essence, although it can be a component, in individuated form, of the actual essence of individual human beings.

More convincing still is how cleanly my suggestion enables us to reconcile the demonstrated existence of common (formal) essences of finite modes—among others, a common human nature—with the fact that there is “no small difference” to Spinoza between the essences of a drunkard and a philosopher. The latter is something that follows from Spinoza’s account in IIIP57S of how there is “no small difference” between their respective affects of joy.<sup>38</sup> For, as IIIP57 explains, if “desire is the very nature, or essence, of each [thing]” insofar as that essence is “constituted” in some way such as to manifest itself as a determinate striving to be and act, and “joy and sadness”—as well as the countless other affects founded in them—are merely this desire itself insofar as it is “increased or diminished, aided or restrained” (IIIP9S), then “each affect of each individual differs from the affect of another as much as the essence of the one from the essence of the other” (IIIP57). But what must be kept in mind is that the desire of each individual human being—which involves a striving to act and persevere in being—is not the same thing as our common formal essence, even though it involves it or expresses it in individuated form. For, as we have seen, the formal essence that is common to us *qua* human does not inherently involve such a striving. Desire is the same thing as our *actual* essence, which does inherently involve a striving to act and persevere in being, and involves our common formal essence, only in individuated form. Thus, Spinoza’s definition of desire should be understood to mean: “desire is man’s very [*formal*] essence, insofar as it [that is, our common formal essence] is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it”—or, as Spinoza also puts it, “through some constitution of itself” (IIIP56)—“to do something” (III Def. Affs. I).

Hence, it would be more precise to say, on the basis of IIIP57S, that there is “no small difference” between the *actual* essences of a drunkard and a philosopher. But this does not mean that there is nothing common in their actual essences—that is, that they do not share a common essence *qua* human. After all, just before making his comment about the difference between the affects of joy of a drunkard and those of a philosopher, Spinoza explains that it follows from the fact that the affects of individuals differ to the degree that their essences differ (IIIP57) that “the affects of the animals



which are called irrational (...) differ from men's affects as much as their nature differs from human nature"—a statement within this very scholium that strongly suggests the existence of a common nature, namely, the capacity for reason, which distinguishes all individual humans, as such, from the "lower animals (*bruta*)". So the fact that the actual essences of the drunkard and philosopher differ greatly must mean that while they share a common essence, this common formal essence has taken on different "constitutions" in them, such as to be differently actualized—and thus determined and individuated—in them. In the philosopher, whose formal essence is constituted mainly by adequate ideas, the actual essence is, in large part, an adequate expression of the common (formal) human essence: reason or the capacity to form adequate ideas. Thus, his constitution, through which his formal essence is actualized and determined to operate, is largely a self-constitution: it flows from, or is an adequate expression of, his formal essence as actualized—and thus individuated—by the causal order of nature. The very same formal essence in the drunk has been actualized and individuated by the causal order of nature in such a way that it is largely constituted, modified, affected or determined to operate ("do something") by external causes. Hence, in the drunkard, the common formal human essence is far less adequately expressed; he has been overwhelmed by passive affects that are ultimately disempowering, and thus the adequate expression of his common formal human essence as reason—which his actual essence must involve and therefore strive for to some extent insofar as he is human (IIP47; IVP36)—has been stunted by external causes.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the actual essences of the drunkard and philosopher may be said to differ quite a bit, for the constitution of each individual human being will differ according to the way each is acted upon by the "common order of nature". But these actual essences will nevertheless—albeit to varying degrees—involve the actualization, in individuated form, of the common formal essence: reason. Hence, while their actual essences may differ greatly, they do not differ in the more fundamental sense in which the essences—and hence affects—of irrational animals differ from those of humans (cf. *E* IIP57S). This is why, *qua* human, the drunk must be thought of as having the potential to become a sage, and why it is appropriate to exhort a drunk to begin living according to the dictates of reason—that is, such that the constitution of his formal essence (namely, his actual essence) would better correspond to, or more adequately express, his common formal human essence: reason. By contrast, such exhortations are totally inappropriate with respect to the "lower animals", which are "irrational" by their formal essences.

The fact that common traits or essences cannot "constitute the essence of any singular thing" (IIP37) does not undermine my theory. On the contrary, it is perfectly in keeping with my interpretation of Spinoza's definition (IID2) of what it is for something to "constitute the essence of a thing", according to which it is always something individual. It is also congruent with my suggestion that formal essences are (or at least can be) common, and can really be in actually existing individual things as metaphysical constituents of their being, but only in individuated form. But what, more precisely, is responsible for the individuation of common (formal) essences—or, if one prefers, of finite modes having the same formal essence?<sup>40</sup>

Spinoza frequently gives the impression that what ultimately individuates the formal essences of finite modes—that is, constitutes finite individuals as the finite individuals they are—is the affections they receive through external causes (the causal order of nature). To the extent that, as mere parts of nature, we are all necessarily subject to such external determinations (IVP4), we are all necessarily individuated. On this model, what would individuate us, or our common formal essence, would be passive affections—that is, constitutions that do not stem from our common formal human nature. To cite but one piece of evidence for this: having just finished explaining in chapters VII and IX of the Appendix to part IV that humans guided by reason—that is, who act (IIIP3) and are thus not constituted by external affections, but rather self-constituting—agree entirely in nature, Spinoza writes in chapter X that humans are "contrary" to each other insofar as they are moved by affects of hate. The latter are merely affects of sadness with accompanying ideas of their external causes. They are thus, by IIIP59, rooted in passive affections. Hence, humans differ from each

other—that is, do not agree in nature—to the extent they are governed by the external, causal order of nature.<sup>41</sup> This is confirmed two paragraphs later when Spinoza writes that “men vary—there being few who live according to the rule of reason”. Clearly, the presupposition here is that men do not vary at all to the extent that they are rational or constituted by adequate ideas.

Because we are mere parts of nature and the latter is not governed by, or does not follow from, the laws of our nature alone, we are necessarily prey to disempowering passive affects. But were it ever the case, *per impossibile*, that our actual essences perfectly and fully expressed our common formal essence as reason or the power to develop adequate ideas, we would all be constituted by nothing but adequate ideas and know all things as God knows them (IIP32). In this way, since there is only one order of nature, and this same order is only expressed in different ways in the various attributes (IIP7S), our minds would thus come to “agree with”—that is, achieve unity with—“the order of the whole of nature” (IV App. Ch. XXXII). And this is to say that God would not have to think anything other than the actual essence of our minds in order to think both himself and this single “order of the whole of nature” (VP36). On the interpretation sketched in the preceding paragraph, according to which what individuates us are the passive affections to which we are subject insofar as we are not rational, completely rational persons would thereby become absolutely indistinguishable. They would literally constitute one and the same being.<sup>42</sup> For the “order of the intellect”—that is, of adequate ideas that, as such, correspond to the true ontological and causal order of things as they unfold from God—“is the same in all men” (IIP18S). So insofar as we would be constituted by the exact same ideas, in the exact same order, we would all, by the principle of the identity of indiscernibles to which Spinoza must subscribe as an unwavering adherent to the principle of sufficient reason (IA3 and A4),<sup>43</sup> become numerically one individual. On this reading, Spinoza would thus be a (theoretical) monopsychist.

This reading has the merit of cohering with the fact, which we have gathered primarily from our study of IVP30, that while common (formal) essences are really in, or real metaphysically constituent parts of, the actual essences of separate individuals, they are not separately instantiated by these individuals. Two or more things do not have a common nature in the sense that separate instances of some general nature would be in each. Common natures are common in much the same way the attribute of extension is “common” to the modes of extension: that is, in such a way that it is not numerically distinct instances of the nature that are “in” distinct, individual things, even though it is made fully determinate in each. It is ontologically one and the same nature that is in distinct, individual things, even though it is in them *qua* variously individuated. It remains fundamentally one and the same in these individual things because the things that individuate it remain “external” to its “inmost” being, even though it cannot be fully actualized without them.

I have suggested that in being actualized, common formal essences are individuated. How can this still be true, even in the hypothetical scenario of the absolutely rational person—that is, the person whose actual essence solely and perfectly expresses her common human formal essence (reason)? My suggestion is that perhaps there are two ways that, in coming to exist, the formal essence can be individuated. It can be individuated by being constituted by external causes—that is, by passive affections. In this case, since no two modes can be the same through the way they are constituted through passive affections, many human beings can exist. But if the external order of nature were to actualize the common formal human essence in such a way that this causal order only ever enabled this essence to express itself adequately—that is, in such a way that an absolutely rational person were actually to exist—then it would still be individuated in coming to actually exist, but in a way that would not allow there to be any more than *one* single human being.<sup>44</sup> If this is not impossible, then the ideal of an absolutely rational person is not unattainable. But if it is—and IVA1 strongly suggests that Spinoza took this impossibility for granted<sup>45</sup>—perhaps the ideal of an absolutely rational person is meant to be precisely that: something that, for metaphysical reasons, cannot ever be fully realized, but only ever approximated to varying degrees.<sup>46</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I will conclude with a quick look at two final passages that seem to exclude the possibility of common natures of finite modes: IIP40S1 and IIPP48–49. The first can lend the impression that all “universal notions” are inadequate ideas produced by the imagination.<sup>47</sup> But IIP40S2 makes very clear that certain “universal notions” are perfectly adequate: for example, the notions that correspond to the most common aspects of things, which we have seen are adequate in the minds of all human beings.<sup>48</sup> IIP40S1 does cite “Man” along with “Horse” and “Dog” as examples of inadequate universal notions grounded in the imagination. I can only suggest, in the light of everything we have seen, that what Spinoza is calling inadequate is really only a certain kind of universal conception of, for example, “man”: namely, one that is based in the imagination and taken to refer to things capable of multiple instantiations.<sup>49</sup> “Common notions”, on the other hand, are formed by reason. As such, they are perfectly adequate.

IIP48 and P49 mount an attack on the notion of free will. This attack is based on a critique of the notion of an absolute faculty of will as nothing more than a “universal notion” and, thus, “being of reason”. Our mind contains “only singular volitions”. Because volition is nothing other than the affirmation or negation involved in ideas, this is to say that our mind contains only “this and that affirmation, and this and that negation” (not any will-in-general as such: that is, in indeterminate or non-individuated form). The universal notion of an indeterminate faculty of will is nothing but an abstract idea, which the mind “forms from particulars” in the same way that it forms the idea of “stone-ness” from “this or that stone”, or “man” from “Peter or Paul”. At first sight, these propositions thus seem to exclude the possibility of mind-independent common natures and properties.

But in fact, what they say fits well with what I have argued in this paper. As Spinoza tells us in IIP49S, a “universal idea” is something that can be “said equally of one, a great many, or infinitely many individuals”. As we have seen, this makes it a being of reason, something that can only exist within the mind. But, as we have also seen, universality is not the same thing as commonality. The latter can be real or “in” things. A universal idea is adequate—and thus what Spinoza calls a “common notion”—if it is based on something that is really common to many things. And what Spinoza says of the universal idea of will-in-general “by which we explain singular volitions” is that it corresponds to “what is common to them all”. The “will” (in general or indeterminate form), he explains, is a universal idea that “signifies only what is common to all ideas: viz., the affirmation, whose adequate essence, therefore, insofar as it is thus conceived abstractly, must be in each idea, and in this way only must be the same in all”. Spinoza’s language is still that of a realist here: the “adequate essence”—which I take to mean *formal* essence—of affirmation (or negation) in general, which is what volition in general is reducible to, is here said to really be “in” each singular affirmation (or negation), and thus each volition. Spinoza adds that affirmation (or negation) is not the same in all insofar as affirmations (or negations) are what “constitute” the essence of individual ideas, “for in that regard the singular affirmations differ from one another as much as the [singular] ideas themselves do”. This is consistent with the theory I have presented in this paper, according to which common formal essences such as the indeterminate or common form of affirmation and negation can be said to be “in” or “common to” many existing things (in this case: the actual affirmations or negations that existing ideas consist in or involve), but only in individuated or “constituted” form (as ontologically constitutive parts of their actual essence or being). And it is only in this “constituted” form that affirmation or negation is what individual ideas consist in *qua* individual. Another way to refer to the indeterminacy of a common trait or nature is to say that it is “abstract”. Thus, accordingly, the notions that refer to such properties will be abstract. But they will not be abstract in the pejorative sense that imaginary universals are abstract because they do not correspond to anything in things and merely represent “confused” ideas of things formed on the basis of the way they affect our body (cf. IIP40S1). They will be abstract in the sense that the true and adequate knowledge of good and evil, which is derived from the adequate grasp of our common (formal) human essence, and thus applies to us *qua* human—that is, insofar as we have a common human nature—is said to be “abstract or universal” (IVP62S).

The adequacy of the “true knowledge of good and evil” and its derivation from an adequate conception of our common human nature should be clear on the basis of my analysis of IVP36 alone (see Part I of this paper). But I am by no means the first to argue that Spinoza’s entire account of human perfection and happiness in the *Ethics* is explicitly grounded in the rational grasp of a common human nature.<sup>50</sup> What this paper has served to show is that, contrary to what is sometimes claimed,<sup>51</sup> Spinoza did not undermine the systematic coherence of the *Ethics* by proceeding in this way. The “ethics of the *Ethics*” flows from, and does not contradict, its metaphysics.<sup>52</sup>

#### Funding

The author received no direct funding for this research.

#### Author details

Erik Stephenson<sup>1</sup>

E-mail: [erik.stephenson@carleton.ca](mailto:erik.stephenson@carleton.ca)

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4710-5638>

<sup>1</sup> The College of the Humanities, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6.

#### Citation information

Cite this article as: Common natures of finite modes in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Erik Stephenson, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1190438.

#### Notes

- Barbone (2002), Bidney (1962), pp. 269–271, Curley (1973), p. 357, Donagan (1973b), p. 250, Eisenberg (1977), pp. 118, 129, Friedman (1978, 1986), pp. 89–90; p. 383, Harris (1978), MacKinnon (1924), Matson (1990), p. 87, Rice (1991) and Rice (1994), Savan (1958), p. 217, Steinberg (1984), Taylor (1926), p. 197; Ward (2011), pp. 25–26, Wilson (1996), p. 114, and Yovel (1989), Vol. I, p. 162.
- I will frequently use the terms “individuals”, “particulars”, and “singulars” interchangeably and in a broadly “scholastic” sense to refer to entities that are incapable of multiple instantiations. I will, however, make clear when I am using “individuals” or “singulars” with the meaning Spinoza grants these terms (which, as I will explain, includes but is more precise than the scholastic sense).
- It should be stressed right away that, on my reading, such common natures will turn out to have “mind-independent existence” only in a highly qualified manner. I will show that they are real ontological components of actually existing finite individuals, but that it is ultimately *only* in inhering—in individuated form—in actually existing finite individuals that they have full existence. They have no existence in themselves.
- Other scholars who identify realist aspects in Spinoza’s *Ethics* include: Bidney (1962), pp. 146–147; Della Rocca (2008), pp. 93–99, 194; Donagan (1988), p. 51; *cp.* 250; Haserot (1950); MacKinnon (1924); Martin (2008); Matheron (1988), p. 155; Miller (2003), p. 265; and Nadler (2012), p. 228.
- I include conceptualist readings within the “purely nominalist” camp (for example, Hübner, 2015 [forthcoming in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*: esp. p. 32 of online copy]). See fn. 12 below. For the purely nominalist reading, see: Barbone (2002); Donagan (1973b), p. 250; Friedman (1978), pp. 89–90; Rice (1994), pp. 20–21; Rivaud (1906); Ward (2011), pp. 25–26; Wilson (1996), p. 114; and Yovel (1989), Vol. I, p. 162.
- This paper will not consider how Spinoza’s stance in the *Ethics* on the ontological status of universals—or, more precisely, of common natures of finite modes—squares with what he has to say on the matter in other works. There are two principal reasons for this. First, in taking inspiration from Euclid and writing his *Ethics* “in geometric order”, Spinoza clearly thought of this work as systematically self-contained. It is thus an interesting and, in the eyes of its author himself, legitimate exercise to seek to determine its teachings in isolation from his other works. Second, I simply haven’t the space in this paper to (1) engage in the detailed study of the *Ethics* required to demonstrate the ultimate coherence of its doctrine on common natures of finite modes and (2) trace the connections and differences between the *Ethics* and his other works on this score. While this second enterprise might shed light on aspects of Spinoza’s development, it would not fundamentally alter my reading. Suffice it to say that I believe the doctrine of the *Ethics* on common natures of finite modes to be: (1) compatible with the little the political works have to say on the issue, but (2) quite likely irreconcilable with the early works, in which Spinoza’s thinking appears on the whole to be much more plainly nominalistic.
- References to Spinoza’s *Ethics* follow the standard format: Roman numeral = Part; P + Arabic numeral = proposition number; Dem = Demonstration; S = Scholium; C = Corollary; App = Appendix. Quotations are all from the English translation by Curley in de Spinoza (1988).
- Cf.* IIP40S1 or IIP49S (GII/135,1–5).
- In this paragraph and the last, I have been speaking broadly of the natures of modes in general. But my argument in what follows will ultimately concentrate on the natures of *finite* modes. What thus matters for my purposes in this paper is that it be granted that neither existence nor universality or individuality pertain inherently to the natures of *finite* modes.
- Cf.* Haserot (1950), p. 479 and Martin (2008), pp. 493–494. Pace Ward (2011), pp. 25–26. I am assuming, of course, that individual human beings are finite—an assumption the postulated simultaneous existence of many distinct human beings of the same nature would seem to warrant in light of ID2.
- Cf.* Gueroult (1974), Vol. II, p. 527 and Haserot (1950), p. 480.
- Cf.* Hübner (2015) (PPQ), pp. 20–30, Rice (1991), p. 300, (1994), p. 30. To Hübner, universal essences have true mental being, but not mind-independent being. They exist as adequate ideas in the mind, but track only similarities between things that in themselves do not have anything in common. This cannot be; an adequate idea is one that is true (IIP34) and thus corresponds to how things are in themselves (IA6).
- Steinberg (1984), pp. 308–310. I do not agree with what she takes it to mean for individual human beings to share a nature that is “absolutely identical” in each (see fn. 42).
- Pace Martin (2008), p. 507. *Cf.* Rice (1994), p. 23. Common natures of finite modes—or traits common to the natures of finite modes—are thus all like the characteristic finite modes of the same attribute hold in common, simply in virtue of being modes of that attribute. Attributes are “unique” and “indivisible” (IP15S). Hence, while they are common to all of their modes, they cannot be distinctly instantiated by them; the entire nature of the attribute must be present in all of its modes (*Idem.*; see Steinberg, 1984, p. 309).

15. That is, ideas of things God has purely “insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind” (IIP11C).
  16. The same must be said, for the same reasons (*mutatis mutandis*), about the attribute of thought.
  17. Cf. Crane and Sandler (2005), p. 191, 193, Deveaux (2003), pp. 331–333, and Donagan (1973a), p. 180.
  18. Many scholars agree that the common human essence is at least partially constituted by reason: e.g. Jaquet (2005), p. 85; Jarrett (2002), pp. 161–162; Haserot (1950), p. 488; Lermond (1988), p. 64, 68; Miller (2005), p. 164, 167 fn. 30, 170; Temkine (1994), p. 439, 444; Youpa (2003), p. 479; and Zac (1972), p. 47, 54, 56. Sangiacomo (2013), p. 86 believes Spinoza “never furnishes a valid and univocal criterion to distinguish humans from non-humans”. Cf. Gueroult (1974), Vol. II, pp. 547–551, Harris (1978), p. 125, Ramond (1995), p. 249; 1999, p. 90, and Wilson (2003, pp. 342–344, 347).
  19. A host of other passages bear witness to Spinoza’s realism regarding a common human nature: e.g. IIP10S; IVP35 Dem.; and IV App., VII and IX.
  20. In other words, what I wish to argue is that while common natures of finite modes are real components of actually existing individual things, and thus the purely nominalistic reading is mistaken, Spinoza must nevertheless be regarded as eschewing full-fledged Platonic realism because the common natures of finite modes only have actual existence insofar as they inhere, in individuated form, in actually existing individual things. He thus charts a middle course between extreme realism and extreme nominalism with respect to the ontological status of common natures of finite modes.
  21. See, e.g.: Bennett (1984), p. 61; Crane and Sandler (2005), p. 194; Della Rocca (1996, p. 87; 2008, p. 95); Viljanen (2007), p. 140; Ward (2011), p. 27; and Yovel (1989), Vol. I, p. 163.
  22. Such a conclusion would seem to be corroborated by IIP40S1. Part III of this paper will show how this and the other passages cited at the outset of Part II harmonize with a realist reading.
  23. Cf. Barbone (2002), p. 97, Hübner (2015) (PPQ), pp. 13–14, Rice (1994), pp. 29–31, and Rivaud (1906), p. 54.
  24. E.g. Bidney (1962), p. 147 and 271; MacKinnon (1924), pp. 357–359; and Savan (1958), pp. 216, 219–220. Della Rocca comes close (1996), p. 87, (2008), p. 95. Cf. Joachim (1901), pp. 96–97.
  25. Taylor (1937). Cf. Boss (1992) pp. 219–224, Carriero (1995), p. 272, Rice (1994), p. 29 and 31, Schneewind (1997), p. 218, Sévèrac (2005), pp. 322–327, and Temkine (1994), pp. 438–439.
  26. Martin (2008) also believes such a reconciliation is possible. Our solutions both hinge upon the distinction between formal and actual essences. However, our conceptions of the natures of and relations between these essences differ sharply. This makes the affinities between our solutions superficial.
  27. See pages 2 and 3 above.
  28. IID7 justifies the interpolation of “finite”.
  29. Spinoza tries to make the status of formal essences clearer in IIP8S with a twofold analogy: (1) between the infinity of nonexistent rectangles that can be formed from intersecting segments of the circle and that, before being traced, exist only insofar as they are unactualized potentialities of the circle, and the infinity of nonexistent finite modes, which really have no existence, but may be said to “be” possible ways in which their respective attributes can be expressed; (2) between the ideas of nonexistent rectangles that are merely implicit in the actual idea of the circle, and the ideas of nonexistent finite modes that are merely implicit in the actual idea of their respective attributes. For different accounts, see Martin (2008), pp. 498–499 and Schmaltz (1997), p. 217.
  30. Carriero (2011), pp. 84–85 and Sangiacomo (2013), p. 81 deny essences of any sort are mere “possibilities of being”. Cf.: Bennett (1984), p. 357; Donagan (1973b, pp. 249–250, 254); Friedman (1986), p. 383, 393 and 397; Haserot (1950), p. 479; Matheron (1988), pp. 575–576; and Ward (2011), p. 20, 35.
  31. Donagan takes the essences of nonexistent modes to be “formal essences”, but thinks they are only ever individual (1973b), p. 250. Cf. Friedman (1986), p. 388 and 397. Haserot (1950), p. 482 and Martin (2008), p. 497, 500 allow for common formal essences but, like Giacotti (1991), pp. 108–109, do not do justice to the fact that formal essences are in themselves devoid of any form of existence whatsoever (see fn. 34).
  32. Schmaltz (1997), p. 216. Cf. Carriero (2011), p. 86.
  33. In this respect, I am in agreement with Barbone (2002), p. 97 and 99, Crane and Sandler (2005), p. 192, Donagan (1973b), p. 250, Rice (1994), pp. 29–31, and Rivaud (1906), p. 54.
  34. Martin (2008), pp. 500–504 regards formal essences as existing separately from—and never as an “element” of the actual essences of (cf. Sangiacomo (2013), p. 94)—the singular things merely “exemplifying” them (p. 508). More precisely, he regards them as infinite mediate modes. But, as Donagan suggests (1988), p. 195, the fact that formal essences have no being in themselves means they cannot be infinite modes of any kind (pace Nadler, 2012, pp. 228–234; Friedman, 1978, pp. 89–90; Gueroult, 1968, Vol. I, pp. 321–322; Schmaltz, 1997, p. 214; Ward, 2011, p. 32). For infinite and eternal modes, as such—and not *qua* formal essences of these modes—are actual essences that involve infinite and eternal existence. Hence, Martin is guilty of doing what he accuses Donagan of doing (2008: fn. 21): viz., confusing formal and actual essences. The same reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*, serves to demonstrate that formal essences cannot be finite modes. The basic problem with Martin’s reading is to assume, on the basis of ID5, that formal essences are modes. By ID5, a mode is something that exists “in another through which it is also conceived”; and by IP29S, it is something that is produced by God. Granted, Spinoza says that formal essences “exist” insofar as they are comprehended in their respective attributes. But Spinoza’s point is that they have no existence at all beyond being merely implicit in (i.e. not “yet” distinguishable from) their respective attributes as possible ways in which the attributes can be expressed. They are thus a “part” of *natura naturans*, not *natura naturata*—i.e. the total system of modes that have followed from, and thus express, God’s infinite being or causal power (IP29S; pace Ward, 2011, pp. 20–21, 31–37). And yet neither are they the attributes themselves. For in this case, they would have being in themselves. They are possible forms—merely latent within the self-subsistent being of the attributes—in which this being belonging to the attributes can be expressed.
- My intention in this paper is to outline a solution to the apparent tension between realist and nominalist strands in the *Ethics* with respect to the essences of finite modes. A complete account of my proposed solution would require a thorough study of Spinoza’s infinite modes—one I cannot undertake here. I want nevertheless to sketch what such an account involving the infinite modes would look like. This sketch will make clear why a more detailed account is not necessary for the more general—and thus somewhat simplified—account I am giving in the body of this paper to be both intelligible and tenable.
- Loosely following Gueroult (1968), Vol. I, pp. 313–322 and Giacotti (1991), I take the infinite immediate mode of thought to be the part of the infinite intellect that



- contains *both* the formal essences of all things implicitly and indistinctly within its idea of all of the divine attributes (including thought), *and* these very same formal essences in a first, partially actualized state as the actually existing ideas of these formal essences conceived distinctly as “following from” God’s attributes. I take the corresponding infinite immediate mode of extension to be motion-and-rest and to contain—again in a first, partially actualized state—the formal (bodily) essences that in themselves are merely implicit in the attribute of extension, as the actually existing laws of the natures of (extended) things. Crucially, I say that *in themselves* the things the infinite immediate modes comprise are only in “a first, partially actualized state” because such things as motion-and-rest *tout court* or the laws of the natures of things are *common*, and therefore in need of individuation to truly exist. They are only fully actualized when they figure, in individuated form, as metaphysically constitutive parts of fully determinate individual things. This is where the infinite mediate modes come in. Still loosely following Gueroult and Gancotti (1991), pp. 106–107, I take the infinite mediate mode of extension to be the totality of the infinite system of finite modes—that is, fully determinate, individuated and thus *actualized* individuals at various levels of complexity—in their various states and causal relations existing “simultaneously” in an eternal present. I take the corresponding infinite mediate mode of thought to be the part of the infinite intellect that is merely the idea of this infinite totality of finite modes in their various states and causal relations existing “all at once” in an eternal present. This second part grasps motion-and-rest and the laws of the natures of things that are embedded in it *as these are involved*, in fully individuated form, “in” finite modes, and as they govern their determinate causal interactions. In other words, it knows them in their fully actualized—and thus individuated—states *as* (parts of) the actual essences of things. The separation of the infinite modes into immediate and mediate is thus somewhat artificial, on my view, and must not be conceived in a rigidly dichotomous way, for they only *truly* exist as two facets of *one actually existing thing*: the total system of *natura naturata*. Thus, in a complete and more detailed account of my theory, I would say that formal essences exist “in” the actual essences of existing finite modes, but as what one might call the “partial actual essences” that make up the infinite immediate modes, and which themselves only truly exist when involved or expressed, in individuated form, in the actual essences of the existing individual finite modes that together make up the infinite mediate modes.
35. IIP105 shows that whatever “belongs to” the essence of something “constitutes the essence of” that thing.
  36. Martin (2008), p. 497. *Cp.* Bennett (1984), p. 61 (though *cp.* 147), Curley (1988), p. 111, Deveaux (2003), p. 333, Gancotti (1991), pp. 108–109, and Haserot (1950), p. 482.
  37. Donagan (1973b), p. 250, (1988), p. 59.
  38. Affects are affections of the body, as well as the ideas thereof, which either aid or hinder the body’s drive to be or act (and thus also the mind’s striving for the same). Joy reflects an empowering affection.
  39. *Cf.* Viljanen (2011), pp. 154–157, who is criticized by Sangiacomo (2013), p. 96.
  40. *Cf.* Donagan (1973b), p. 250, 252 and Steinberg (1984), p. 312.
  41. *Cf.* Bidney (1962), pp. 145–146.
  42. *Cf.* Crane and Sandler (2005), p. 194, Haserot (1950), p. 489, and Matheron (1988), p. 155. My claim is consistent with Steinberg’s initial conclusion that insofar as humans share a common essence, they are “absolutely identical” (1984), p. 309. But it does not accord with her elucidation of this conclusion, according to which individual humans—*qua* human—are discrete and differentiated parts of a larger whole (“humanity”) that they are regulated by their essence to serve. Rice (1991), pp. 295–301 thinks that criticizing Steinberg’s elucidation undermines her initial conclusion via *modus tollens*. This is wrong because her elucidation does not follow from, but rather contradicts, her initial conclusion.
  43. Della Rocca (2008), p. 196. Spinoza’s belief in the identity of indiscernibles is clear in IP4 (Crane and Sandler (2005), p. 195).
  44. Just as there can only be one order of nature, the whole of which constitutes a single Individual (IIL75 after P13): viz., the infinite mediate mode of each attribute (which, as I explained in note 34, inherently involves, or is but the expression in individuated and fully determinate form of, the contents of its associated infinite immediate mode). For an actually existing, absolutely rational human being would be one with this order that itself constitutes one individual.
  45. I would like to thank one of the Journal’s anonymous reviewers for pointing out the relevance of IVA1 to this question.
  46. Garrett (1996), p. 289. Spinoza does say things that suggest that we retain our personal individuality even when, in being active, our actual essences adequately express our common formal essence as reason. For example: he says it is insofar as they are rational that individual human beings are necessarily of assistance to each other, and necessarily seek for each other the good they enjoy and seek for themselves. True, he says that it is insofar as they are rational that two individual human beings will be able to “join together”, “compose an individual twice as powerful” and thus form “one mind and one body”. But they “compose” an individual twice as powerful in part precisely because they continuously mirror each other’s bliss (VP20), such that each other’s affects of joy are constantly being strengthened in an infinite feedback loop. And this presupposes that some ontological distinction is maintained between them. Thus, according to this second perspective discernible in the *Ethics*, even if human beings are absolutely the same insofar as their actual essences completely express their common formal essence, they do not thereby fuse ontologically. I find it difficult to reconcile this second perspective with Spinoza’s fundamental belief in the principle of sufficient reason (which entails the principle of the identity of indiscernibles). *Cf.* Barbone (2002), p. 94, 101 and 106.
  47. The imagination is our capacity to think of things through the way they affect our body. When we think things through the imagination, we know them only insofar as they affect our body. The imagination is thus an inadequate power of cognition grounded in images, which are affections of the body, and “whose ideas present external bodies as present to us (...) even if they do not reproduce the figures of things” (IIP17S).
  48. Bennett (1984), pp. 39–40, Donagan (1988), pp. 50–52, Lermond (1988), p. 55, and Steinberg (1984), pp. 315–316. *Cp.* Rice (1994), p. 28.
  49. *Cf.* Haserot (1950), p. 478.
  50. See, among others: Della Rocca (2008), pp. 179–182; Jarrett (2002), pp. 167–169; and Youpa (2010), pp. 72–75.
  51. See note 25.
  52. I wish to thank the Journal’s anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and points of criticism. The paper benefitted from their assistance.

## References

- Barbone, S. (2002). What counts as an individual for Spinoza? In O. I. Koistinen & J. I. Biro (Eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical themes* (pp. 89–112). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, J. (1984). *A study of Spinoza's Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Bidney, D. (1962). *The psychology and ethics of Spinoza*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Boss, G. (1992). L'idéal humain chez Spinoza [The human ideal in Spinoza]. In A. Dominguez (Ed.), *La Ética de Spinoza: Fundamentos y significados* [Spinoza's Ethics: Foundations and meanings] (pp. 217–232). Universidad Della Castilla La Mancha.
- Carriero, J. (1995). On the relationship between mode and substance in Spinoza's metaphysics. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 33, 245–273.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hph.1995.0026>
- Carriero, J. (2011). Conatus and perfection in Spinoza. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy*, 35, 69–92.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/misp.2011.35.issue-1>
- Crane, J. K., & Sandler, R. (2005). Identity and distinction in Spinoza's Ethics. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 86, 188–200.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0114.2005.00222.x>
- Curley, E. (1973). Spinoza's moral philosophy. In M. Grene (Ed.), *Spinoza: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 354–376). Garden City: Doubleday.
- Curley, E. (1988). *Behind the geometrical method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Della Rocca, M. (1996). *Representation and the mind-body problem in Spinoza*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Della Rocca, M. (2008). *Spinoza*. London: Routledge.
- de Spinoza, B. (1988). In E. Curley (Ed.), *The collected works of Spinoza*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Deveaux, S. (2003). The divine essence and the conception of God in Spinoza. *Synthese*, 135, 329–338.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1023594617953>
- Donagan, A. (1973a). Essence and the distinction of attributes in Spinoza's metaphysics. In M. Grene (Ed.), *Spinoza: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 164–181). Garden City: Doubleday.
- Donagan, A. (1973b). Spinoza's proof of immortality In M. Grene (Ed.), *Spinoza: A collection of critical essays* (pp. 241–258). Garden City: Doubleday.
- Donagan, A. (1988). *Spinoza*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Eisenberg, P. D. (1977). Is Spinoza an ethical naturalist? *Philosophia*, 7, 107–133.
- Friedman, J. (1978). An overview of Spinoza's Ethics, 37, 67–106.
- Friedman, J. (1986). How the finite follows from the infinite in Spinoza's metaphysical system. *Synthese*, 69, 371–407.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00413979>
- Garrett, D. (1996). Spinoza's ethical theory. In D. Garrett (Ed.), *The cambridge companion to Spinoza* (pp. 267–309). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Giancotti, E. (1991). On the problem of infinite modes. In Y. Yovel (Ed.), *God and nature: Spinoza's metaphysics* (pp. 97–118). Leiden: Brill.
- Gueroult, M. (1968). *Spinoza (I): Dieu* [Spinoza (I): God]. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Gueroult, M. (1974). *Spinoza (II): L'âme* [Spinoza (II): the mind]. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Harris, E. E. (1978). The essence of man and the subject of consciousness. In J. Wetlesen (Ed.), *Spinoza's philosophy of man: Proceedings of the Scandinavian Spinoza Symposium* (1977) (pp. 119–135). Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Haserot, F. S. (1950). Spinoza and the status of universals. *The philosophical review*, 59 (469–492).
- Hübner, K. (2015). Spinoza on essences, universals, and beings of reason. *Forthcoming in pacific philosophical quarterly*. Retrieved from [www.academia.edu/5466411/Spinoza\\_on\\_essences\\_universals\\_and\\_beings\\_of\\_reason](http://www.academia.edu/5466411/Spinoza_on_essences_universals_and_beings_of_reason)
- Jaquet, C. (2005). La positivité des notions de bien et de mal. [The positivity of the notions of good and evil]. *Les expressions de la puissance d'agir chez Spinoza* [Expressions of the power to act in Spinoza] (pp. 77–90). Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.
- Jarrett, C. (2002). Spinoza on the relativity of good and evil. In O. I. Koistinen & J. I. Biro (Eds.), *Spinoza: Metaphysical themes* (pp. 158–181). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Joachim, H. (1901). *A study of the Ethics of Spinoza*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lermond, L. (1988). *The form of man: Human essence in Spinoza's Ethics*. Leiden: Brill.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004246607>
- MacKinnon, F. I. (1924). The treatment of universals in Spinoza's Ethics. *The Philosophical Review*, 33, 345–359.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2179223>
- Martin, C. P. (2008). The framework of essences in Spinoza's Ethics. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 16, 489–509.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608780802200489>
- Matheron, A. (1988). *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* [Individual and community in Spinoza]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Matson, W. (1990). Body essence and mind eternity in Spinoza. In E. Curley & P.-F. Moreau (Eds.), *Spinoza: Issues and directions* (pp. 82–101). Leiden: Brill.
- Miller, J. (2003). Spinoza and the concept of a law of nature. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 20, 257–275.
- Miller, J. (2005). Spinoza's Axiology. In D. Garber & S. Nadler (Eds.), *Oxford studies in early modern philosophy* (Vol. 2, pp. 149–172). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nadler, S. (2012). Spinoza's Monism and the reality of the finite. In P. Goff (Ed.), *Spinoza on Monism* (pp. 223–243). Hampshire: MacMillan.
- Ramond, C. (1995). *Qualité et quantité dans la philosophie de Spinoza* [Quality and quantity in Spinoza's philosophy]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Rice, L. (1991). Tanquam naturae humanae exemplar [As a model of human nature]: Spinoza on human nature. *The modern schoolman*, 68, 291–303.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/schoolman199168445>
- Rice, L. (1994). Le nominalisme de Spinoza [Spinoza's nominalism]. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 24, 19–32.
- Rivaud, A. (1906). *Les notions d'essence et d'existence dans la philosophie de Spinoza* [The notions of essence and existence in Spinoza's philosophy]. Paris: Alcan.
- Sangiaco, A. (2013). What are human beings? Essences and aptitudes in Spinoza's anthropology. *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 2, 78–100.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7761/JEMS.2.2.78>
- Savan, D. (1958). Spinoza on language. *The Philosophical Review*, 67, 212–225.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2182614>
- Schmaltz, T. (1997). Spinoza's infinite mediate mode. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 35, 199–235.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hph.1997.0024>
- Schneewind, J. B. (1997). *The invention of autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818288>
- Sévérac, P. (2005). *Le devenir actif chez Spinoza* [Spinoza on becoming active]. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Steinberg, D. (1984). Spinoza's ethical doctrine and the unity of human nature. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 22, 303–324.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hph.1984.0039>
- Taylor, A. E. (1926). *Plato: The man and his work*. London: Methuen.
- Taylor, A. E. (1937). Some Inconsistencies in Spinoza (II). *Mind*, 46, 281–301. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/mind/XLVI.183.281>

- Temkine, P. (1994). Le modèle de l'homme libre [The model of the free man]. *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 99, 437–448.
- Viljanen, V. (2007). Field metaphysic, power, and individuation in Spinoza. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 37, 393–418. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cjp.2007.0023>
- Viljanen, V. (2011). *Spinoza's geometry of power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139005210>
- Ward, T. (2011). Spinoza on the essences of modes. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 19, 19–46. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2011.533010>
- Wilson, M. (1996). Spinoza's theory of knowledge. In D. Garrett (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Spinoza* (pp. 89–141). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, M. (2003). For they do not agree in nature with us: Spinoza on the lower animals. In R. Gennaro & C. Huenemann (Eds.), *New essays on the rationalists* (pp. 336–352). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Youpa, A. (2003). Spinozistic self-preservation. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 41, 477–490. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/sjp.2003.41.issue-3>
- Youpa, A. (2010). Spinoza's model of human nature. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 48, 61–76.
- Yovel, Y. (1989). *Spinoza and other heretics: Volumes I and II*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zac, S. (1972). *La Morale de Spinoza* [Spinoza's moral theory]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.



© 2016 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made.

You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

No additional restrictions

You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.



**Cogent Arts & Humanities (ISSN: 2331-1983) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.**

**Publishing with Cogent OA ensures:**

- Immediate, universal access to your article on publication
- High visibility and discoverability via the Cogent OA website as well as Taylor & Francis Online
- Download and citation statistics for your article
- Rapid online publication
- Input from, and dialog with, expert editors and editorial boards
- Retention of full copyright of your article
- Guaranteed legacy preservation of your article
- Discounts and waivers for authors in developing regions

**Submit your manuscript to a Cogent OA journal at [www.CogentOA.com](http://www.CogentOA.com)**

